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WATER RESOURCES: NEW INITIATIVES

Congratulations on making your national watershed congress truly international. I've enjoyed hearing details of the fine progress you are making in watershed management in Canada.

What good neighbors we have become. Look around the world today. Look through the pages of history. Where will you find two other proud nations which have grown so peacefully together as the United States and Canada?

We share most of a continent together. We share watersheds. In that sense and in countless other ways, we share common problems, common opportunities and common futures. So it is altogether proper--even necessary--that we meet in these ways to discuss our joint concerns.

We live so agreeably with one another, it is only when we disagree that we make news. We assume agreement. When we agree upon, say, the management of watersheds--we take it for granted. Yet what a remarkable thing it is that our two great nations look upon such a basic resource as a watershed in the same comprehensive manner. And how fortunate that is for our peoples.

Water, as President Carter reminded us recently, is fundamental--an essential resource that must be dealt with properly and effectively. Fortunately, we have made a beginning.

The watershed management programs of both our nations now provide ways to treat entire geographic areas of land, water, plants, animals,

Remarks by Dr. M. Rupert Cutler, Assistant Secretary of Agriculture for Conservation, Research, and Education, at the 25th Annual National Watershed Congress, Toronto, Canada, June 26, 1978 at 4:30 p.m.

and people as ecosystems. Our watershed programs finally provide a truly holistic approach to the protection and management of the North American landscape, working in harmony with natural systems. They are no longer offering simple piecemeal approaches interlaced with unresolved conflicts.

The diversity of desirable results reflect that approach:

- protection of thousands of communities from floods;
- improvement of fish and wildlife habitats and recreational resources;
- encouragement of private landowners and public land managers to make better land-use decisions;
- improvement of water quality; and
- greater economic opportunity for millions of people.

But, of course, we are not satisfied. President Carter isn't satisfied. Three weeks ago he directed the U.S. Department of Agriculture to encourage accelerated land treatment measures prior to the funding of structural measures on watershed projects--through cost sharing as well as technical help.

He asked for full use in the watershed programs of the new stream channel modification guidelines USDA has worked out with Fish and Wildlife Service.

He asked that watershed projects be monitored after construction to see that plans are met and to lend ideas for improving the design of future projects.

But the President went far beyond watershed programs in his directives of June 6, the day he outlined the new water policy of the United States.

President Carter likes to run a tight ship. He spelled out conservation with a capital C and efficiency with a capital E throughout his message to the Congress. With 25 Federal agencies spending a total of \$10 billion a year on water resource and related programs, a lot of inertia can build up. President Carter is shaking that inertia.

In his water policy message, the President set out to improve the way agencies plan and manage water resource activities; to provide a new national emphasis on water conservation; to enhance cooperation between Federal and State governments; and to heighten the attention to environmental quality in water resource programs.

To accomplish the first aim, he has called for the U.S. Water Resources Council to strengthen the Principles and Standards For Planning Water and Related Land Resources, which all agencies use in carrying out water resource activities.

He directed the Water Resources Council to prepare a manual for calculating project benefits and costs so that the computations and the use of the Principles and Standards are consistently applied and interpreted by all U.S. Federal agencies. He added a project review function to those of the Water Resources Council.

To accomplish water conservation, he has directed that conservation be made a specific component of both economic and environmental objectives in implementing the Principles and Standards; in water and sewer assistance programs; in housing programs; in technical assistance to farmers and urban people; in Federal building management; and in State water assistance programs.

To accomplish better cooperation with State governments--which he considers the focal point for water resource management--he proposed strongly increased Federal funding for State water planning.

He called for formation of a task force of Federal, State, county, city, and other local officials to help guide water policy reforms.

He instructed Federal agencies to identify and resolve Federal and Indian water rights issues--and to negotiate, not litigate, wherever possible.

President Carter said specifically that "sensitivity to environmental protection must be an important aspect of any water-related decision."

To assure more attention to the environment, he directed vigorous and accelerated implementation of several existing laws and executive orders--including those related to floodplain management, historic preservation, and fish, wildlife and wetland-habitat protection.

I have pledged that the U.S. Department of Agriculture will implement promptly the President's new initiatives. We already are well underway on several of them.

As an advocate of wildlife protection over many years in State government, in the environmental community, in academia, and now in the U.S. Federal government, I know it's often difficult to influence the policies and practices of Federal resource agencies. But for the past year and a half I have had the chance to influence those policies and practices. . . and I have used it.

While much of our USDA decisionmaking in the past has given wildlife a fair break--particularly in Forest Service and Soil Conservation Service programs--my role has been to turn that "fair break" into

consideration for wildlife as a full partner in natural resource decisionmaking. . . as important as any other part of our programs. This is because we know that an ecologically sound project also is apt to be a safe, stable, well-accepted project and therefore a good investment.

President Carter's commitment to protection of the wildlife resource as an integral part of the natural environment is genuine and enduring. So is USDA's commitment.

President Carter's water policy message called for more attention to maintaining instream flows and protecting groundwater in new and existing projects. He also placed new emphasis on the desirability of considering nonstructural measures in all kinds of water projects to enhance environmental quality.

His message acknowledged that USDA has taken a number of "progressive actions" during the past year to "reduce the adverse environmental impacts and improve the soil conservation functions" of the small watershed program.

These include:

- a review of inactive or controversial projects to determine whether termination or modification is appropriate;
- joint adoption with the Fish and Wildlife Service of Channel Modification Guidelines which have been published in the Federal Register;
- a requirement that at least 50 percent of specified land treatment measures be in place before dam construction begins.

At last year's Watershed Congress in Washington, D.C., I highlighted several concerns that I had about the focus and direction of the small watershed program.

In the year that followed, USDA has responded positively to my concerns and those of other participants at the Watershed Congress.

In my opinion, we have greatly strengthened the program--and, as I have just indicated, the improvements were recognized by the Administration in its water policy review.

Last year I emphasized my concern about land treatment. Now it truly is being recognized as a major influence on water quality. The Soil Conservation Service has amended its policies to require that at least half of the planned conservation practices be installed--not just agreed to--before Federal assistance is provided for structural measures. We will announce soon a new policy of providing Federal funds to landowners for major land treatment practices to assure high standards and timely installation.

Last year I emphasized my concern about the altering of perennial natural streams through various forms of channel modification. You may recall that we had lengthy discussions about this aspect of watershed projects at last year's Congress.

Since then, we have worked diligently with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to work out mutually acceptable guidelines to reduce misunderstanding, increase attention to important fish and wildlife values, and assure that flood prevention aims can be met.

Assistant Secretary of the Interior Robert Herbst and I jointly released the new channel modification guidelines this past April. As the President asked, we will follow the guidelines to the letter as we cooperate with State agencies, project sponsors, and many interest groups from the beginning of each project.

Last year I emphasized my concern for a more meaningful approach to wetland management. We did review USDA policies to be sure that wetlands are altered only when there are no other choices and the benefits are of overriding importance to society. We have published a new overall strategy for water resources efforts to be sure our policies fully meet the intent of President Carter's Executive Orders on wetlands and on floodplain management, which he issued as part of his Environmental Message to the Nation in May 1977.

On June 2, we published draft guidelines on floodplain management covering all Soil Conservation Service activities. We want to help land users achieve wise use and treatment of all their land, including floodplains. We will change or update a number of policies and procedures to reflect that aim.

Last year I emphasized my concern that more consideration be given to environmental quality as we evaluate the economic benefits in projects. As the Principles and Standards are revised in the days ahead, we will move to give that extra attention to environmental quality.

We will step up the environmental focus we already have begun.

Last year I emphasized my concern that we maximize the use of nonstructural and land treatment alternatives in watershed projects before we conclude that dams or channels must be constructed.

We have given a fresh emphasis to nonstructural approaches--the land treatment cost sharing and the floodplain management guidelines are just two examples. USDA is a leader in conservation land treatment and other nonstructural methods for achieving water resource aims.

We have learned much through cooperative studies with the Environmental Protection Agency, local conservation districts, the International Joint Commission, and others on the relationships among nonpoint source water pollutants, water quality, and land use.

Through our new Rural Clean Water Program authorized last December, through the small watershed program, and through several other ongoing programs we will give major assistance to landowners and local communities in achieving water quality aims through nonstructural approaches.

Last year I emphasized my concern that we do all we can to insure maximum public involvement in the watershed program. It is a Federally assisted program--and it isn't worth much unless its decisions and its landscape changes reflect the desires of the broadest possible spectrum of our society.

The same concern holds true for every other USDA program that assists private landowners and communities or that manages public lands to serve them.

I am tremendously pleased with the fresh dialogue USDA has had this year with citizens and their groups. We need their ideas--and we are listening.

The Forest Service became a really active public opinion seeker through its actions under the Forest and Rangeland Renewable Resources Planning Act (RPA), which demands continuous reassessment and long-range planning in the use of public resources. Its opinion-seeking has gained fresh momentum with RARE II, our search for consensus on proper use of the remaining roadless areas on the National Forests.

We opened the meeting house door--and this spring and summer we expect 150,000 or more comments in meetings or in writing.

Parallel to these Forest Service efforts are the 3,000 public meetings being held at the county level this summer by the Soil Conservation Service. SCS wants to tap public opinion as to America's soil and water conservation needs, carrying out the mandate of the new Soil and Water Resources Conservation Act (RCA).

We will be responsive to RCA and RPA and to the ideas that are forthcoming. They will aid the watershed program and many others.

Finally, at the National Water Conference in St. Louis early last year I pledged my full support to water conservation efforts. USDA has an unmatched record of assisting landowners with improvements in water systems and water use.

We do have a challenge--and a major opportunity to contribute.

Agriculture is the largest user of water in the United States!

Of the 338 billion gallons of water withdrawn from streams and reservoirs in the United States each day--or pumped from the ground--46 percent is for irrigation. In most of the western U.S., irrigation is the largest functional water user--bigger than manufacturing, commerce, domestic water use, power generation, or mineral harvest. Of all the water "consumed" or depleted during each year in the United States, agriculture accounts for more than 80 percent.

USDA will play a major role in helping farmers and others improve their efficiency in water use--through design and installation of systems such as drip irrigation that use less water; through better timing of irrigation, so that each plant gets the water it needs when it needs it

and no more; and through improved methods for delivering and recovering irrigation water. USDA can and will assist farmers and others in safeguarding water supplies and protecting water quality.

I am optimistic that we can succeed because of USDA's demonstrated capabilities in providing technical assistance, in Cooperative Extension, in research, in National Forest watershed management, and in loans to farmers and ranchers for installing important conservation systems.

I have focused this afternoon on President Carter's new initiatives and on progress and concerns in land treatment, in stream channel modification, in wetland management, in environmental quality considerations, in nonstructural alternatives, in public participation, and in water conservation.

These and many other topics related to water resource improvements will require the best in coordination among many Federal and State assistance programs in the United States; among many Federal and provincial assistance programs in Canada; and between our two nations where we share the resources, the opportunities, and the concerns.

I believe strongly that we all can learn much more from each other as we work together.

The time to step up the pace is now.

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